

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Pair of Nights Off-Broadway

David Sheward · Thursday, December 14th, 2017

Mixing myth, urban legend, conspiracy theory, and historical fact, Rajiv Joseph creates a weird tapestry of truth and lies in his new drama *Describe the Night* at the Atlantic Theater Company. Set in various parts of the former Soviet Union and Europe over nearly a century of political turmoil, this overwhelming saga asks hard questions on the relationships between government and media, regular citizens and dictators, and how people manage to live through decades of upheaval. As in his *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* and *Guards at the Raj*, Joseph depicts individuals caught up in the tide of history, swept along by both fanciful and real events.



Danny Burstein and Zach Grenier in *Describe the Night*.

Credit: Ahron R. Foster

Shifting back and forth between regimes and locales, *Night* traces the difficult and slippery path trod by writers and journalists through the dark forest of various forms of Russian tyranny. Real Stalin-era figures such as Odessan novelist Isaac Babel, and Soviet secret police chief Nikolai Yezhov are connected with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 2010 plane crash which killed the entire top level of the Polish government. In fascinatingly poetic and detailed dialogue, Joseph links the various epochs, demonstrating how the truth can be twisted to suit the purposes of whoever happens to hold the reigns of power, be it Stalin, Putin, or—by extension—our current US President.

The title is derived from the opening scene where the idealistic Babel and the brutish Yezhov become unlikely friends while presenting their alternative impressions of the night after a battle in 1920 Poland, the same area where the plane crashes 90 years later. By a series of coincidences, Babel's journal, a symbol of artistic freedom, passes from hand to hand right up until Putin's regime. The plot stretches credulity—some characters live to be over 100—but in Joseph's shadowy world, it doesn't matter. This is a dreamscape of epic proportions enveloping theatergoers with Joseph's storytelling magic as it stuns with unrelenting anger at authoritarian monsters.

Yet none of the multi-layered characters are completely good or evil; each has a mixture of both. Babel is a gentle soul but also launches an affair with his friend Yezhov's wife, Yevgenia. In turn, Yezhov commits numerous atrocities as Stalin's stooge and also lovingly seeks to shield his wife and granddaughter from government purges. Vova, who closely resembles a certain Russian president, is a thug, but also a damaged child seeking his mother who abandoned him. Giovanna Sardelli's subtle and sleek staging emphasizes this ambiguity as do the shaded performances, particularly Danny Burstein's charming but wary Babel, Zach Grenier's bearish Yezhov, Tina

Benko's delicate yet steely Yevgenia, and Max Gordon Moore's brutal, insecure Vova.



David Samuel, Tina Chilip, Andy Grotelueschen, and Paco Tolson in Fiasco Theater's *Twelfth Night* at CSC.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Meanwhile, Classic Stage Company is presenting another *Night* but it's not as complex or intriguing. The company is hosting Fiasco Theater's staging of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. My only previous experience with Fiasco was their intimate and clever small-scale version of *Into the Woods*, so I was looking forward a new take on this oft-produced comedy. Unfortunately, the unimaginative direction by Noah Brody and Ben Seinfeld, who also play Count Orsino and the clown Feste respectively, never raises above the level of a competent college production. The concept seems to have been to plunk the dizzy lovers of the Bard's Illyria down in a New England fishing village so the cast could warble atmospheric sea shanties in between scenes. There is not much spark between the various victims of Cupid's arrows and those with comic roles push their zany schtick too hard to elicit any honest laughter. Too bad this is just a so-so *Twelfth Night* after such a brilliant take on *Woods*.

Describe the Night: Dec. 5—24. Atlantic Theater Company at the Linda Gross Theater, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7pm, Sat 2pm & 7:30pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including two intermissions. \$49.50— (866) 811-4111. www.atlantictheater.org.

Twelfth Night: Dec. 14—Jan. 6, 2018. Fiasco Theater at Class Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St., NYC. Schedule varies. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. \$61. (212) 677-4210. www.classicstage.org.

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